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Curriculum Reform and the Implementation of Independent Learning Policies in Indonesian Schools

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Abstract

This study examines curriculum reform and the implementation of Independent Learning (Merdeka Belajar) policies in Indonesian schools through a non-empirical design combining systematic narrative literature review and policy document analysis. Drawing on peer-reviewed studies and official policy materials, the analysis investigates how governance structures, pedagogical translation, and institutional capacity shape school-level enactment of the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka). Findings indicate that reform outcomes are strongly mediated by leadership competence, professional development ecosystems, and resource distribution, producing significant variation between schools and regions. Teacher agency emerges as the primary mechanism through which autonomy-oriented policy ideals are operationalized, yet interpretive ambiguity and accountability pressures frequently redirect implementation toward procedural compliance. Differentiated learning and project-based orientations are widely positioned as core pedagogical principles, but they remain fragile in contexts lacking sustained institutional support and coherent operational routines. The synthesis further shows that autonomy-based reform can intensify systemic inequity when capacity conditions are uneven, enabling innovation in well-resourced schools while constraining meaningful enactment in disadvantaged settings. The study contributes a multi-level interpretive framework for understanding curriculum reform as capacity-mediated policy enactment.

Keywords : Independent Learning, Curriculum Reform, Policy Implementation, Teacher Agency, Institutional Capacity.



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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary curriculum reform has increasingly been positioned as a strategic response to global educational pressures, including the acceleration of digital transformation, the redefinition of employability and citizenship competencies, and the growing insistence that schools must become adaptive institutions capable of navigating uncertainty rather than merely transmitting stable knowledge. Within this landscape, curriculum policy is no longer treated as a neutral technical design but as a governance instrument through which states attempt to recalibrate the relationship between standardization and autonomy, particularly in systems facing uneven capacity across regions and schools. Indonesia's recent reform trajectory, culminating in the Independent Learning (Merdeka Belajar) and Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) agenda, can be read as part of this global turn toward decentralization, flexibility, and learner-centered paradigms, while still operating within the constraints of national accountability frameworks. The reform is not merely a replacement of documents but a transformation of how pedagogical authority, assessment logics, and school-level decision-making are distributed, making implementation dynamics as decisive as the policy text itself. At the same time, Indonesia's curriculum evolution is historically characterized by recurrent waves of revision, where reform is often motivated by both political shifts and perceived mismatches between schooling outputs and societal demands. A historical reading of Indonesian curriculum development shows that reforms have repeatedly promised modernization and relevance, yet frequently encountered structural constraints in teacher readiness, institutional capacity, and policy coherence across levels of governance (Abidin et al., 2023). In this sense, the Independent Learning agenda represents both a

continuation of long-standing reform patterns and an intensification of the global discourse emphasizing autonomy, differentiation, and innovation as core educational imperatives (Hadi et al., 2023).

Existing scholarship has produced valuable insights into how the Independent Curriculum and Independent Learning policies are interpreted and enacted within Indonesian schools, although much of this evidence remains fragmented across levels of schooling, subject areas, and regional contexts. Studies focusing on provincial implementation illustrate that policy translation is shaped by local administrative cultures, resource distribution, and the interpretive agency of school actors, which can generate uneven enactment even under the same national mandate (Ahid & Sufirmansyah, 2022). Research on the Independent Curriculum in elementary schools has highlighted practical adjustments in lesson planning, classroom organization, and learning activities, indicating that the reform is operationally feasible yet highly dependent on teacher competence and school management support (Efendi & Suastra, 2023). At the pedagogical level, differentiation has emerged as a central mechanism through which the reform attempts to actualize student-centered learning, yet teachers' reflective accounts suggest that differentiation is often understood as a normative expectation rather than a fully internalized instructional framework supported by robust professional development (Gea et al., 2022). The literature also emphasizes that the reform aspires to expand student agency and creativity, positioning learning as a process of exploration rather than compliance, although the translation of these ideals into classroom practice varies considerably (Aini, 2023). Taken together, these studies demonstrate that curriculum reform in Indonesia is not constrained by the absence of policy vision, but by the complexity of implementation within a system where autonomy is introduced into institutions historically accustomed to centralized direction (Mubarok et al., 2023).

Despite the growing body of work, prior research reveals conceptual and empirical limitations that constrain a comprehensive understanding of curriculum reform as a systemic transformation rather than a set of localized practices. A major limitation is that many studies treat implementation as an outcome variable—whether the curriculum is “applied” or “not applied”—rather than as a multi-layered process involving negotiation, reinterpretation, and institutional adaptation. This tendency risks reducing curriculum reform to technical compliance, obscuring the deeper governance tension between national policy coherence and school-level autonomy. Another inconsistency lies in how the Independent Curriculum is framed: some works conceptualize it primarily as a solution to the deficiencies of the 2013 Curriculum, emphasizing the reform as corrective replacement, while other studies treat it as a paradigm shift toward freedom, differentiation, and competence-based learning without sufficiently addressing continuity and path dependency in Indonesian policy cycles (Lestari, 2023; Hadi et al., 2023). The literature also shows a methodological imbalance, where descriptive case studies dominate and large-scale or comparative evidence across diverse school ecologies remains limited, restricting the capacity to generalize patterns of implementation or identify structural determinants. Even within literature reviews, discussions often emphasize the rhetoric of Society 5.0 and educational modernization, yet remain less explicit in theorizing how such macro-level discourses translate into institutional routines, teacher cognition, and classroom-level decisions (Intiana et al., 2023). This gap suggests that the field still lacks an integrative framework capable of connecting curriculum reform as a policy design to curriculum reform as lived practice under unequal institutional conditions.

The unresolved issues are not merely academic, because Indonesia's curriculum reform is unfolding amid persistent disparities in school capacity, teacher professional capital, and governance coherence, meaning that implementation outcomes directly affect educational equity and system legitimacy. When autonomy is introduced into a system with uneven readiness, reform can unintentionally widen gaps between schools that possess organizational capacity and those that struggle with basic infrastructure, leadership support, or teacher development. Evidence from implementation-focused studies indicates that classroom management, learning organization, and school-level strategy become critical mediators of reform effectiveness, implying that policy success depends less on curriculum content than on institutional enactment capacity (Mubarok et al., 2023). Similarly, teacher-level reflections show that differentiation, which is central to the Independent Learning philosophy, requires more than policy instruction; it demands sustained professional learning and supportive organizational conditions, without which differentiation risks becoming symbolic compliance rather than meaningful pedagogy (Gea et al., 2022). The urgency also emerges from the practical challenges of aligning reform ideals with everyday schooling realities, including the integration of subject-specific

goals, assessment expectations, and local constraints that can dilute reform intentions. Studies addressing language education and broader modernization narratives highlight that the reform is frequently justified through global competitiveness and digital-era readiness, yet such narratives can become disconnected from implementation realities unless they are anchored in empirical analyses of how schools operationalize autonomy and innovation (Intiana et al., 2023). For these reasons, the question of how curriculum reform and Independent Learning policies are enacted in Indonesian schools constitutes an urgent scholarly and practical agenda, since it directly shapes whether reform becomes transformative or merely cyclical policy replacement (Abidin et al., 2023).

Within the broader landscape of curriculum studies and policy implementation research, this study is positioned to address the need for a more coherent analytical account of how curriculum reform is translated into institutional and pedagogical practices under the Independent Learning regime. Rather than treating curriculum change as a linear diffusion of policy, the study approaches reform as an interactive process shaped by multiple actors—policy designers, school leaders, teachers, and students—whose interpretations and capacities determine how the curriculum is materialized in classrooms. This positioning is informed by empirical indications that implementation is strongly mediated by leadership support and managerial strategy, particularly in schools where principals play a decisive role in organizing curriculum programs, facilitating teacher adaptation, and coordinating learning systems aligned with reform expectations (Mustoip et al., 2024). At the same time, studies emphasizing student freedom and creativity suggest that reform cannot be evaluated solely through administrative compliance indicators, because its core promise lies in reshaping learning experiences and student agency (Aini, 2023). The study therefore situates itself at the intersection of curriculum governance and instructional practice, aiming to integrate insights from school management, teacher cognition, and curriculum theory to explain why the same policy can generate divergent enactments across schools. By treating implementation as a dynamic policy-practice interface rather than a static measurement of compliance, this research seeks to contribute to international debates on how autonomy-oriented reforms operate in systems characterized by centralized traditions and uneven institutional capacity (Ahid & Sufirmansyah, 2022; Efendi & Suastra, 2023).

This study aims to examine how curriculum reform and Independent Learning policies are implemented in Indonesian schools, with particular attention to the mechanisms through which schools translate national curriculum mandates into organizational routines, instructional strategies, and differentiated learning practices. The study contributes theoretically by proposing an integrative perspective that links curriculum reform cycles, governance tensions, and classroom-level enactment as mutually constitutive rather than separable domains. It contributes methodologically by advancing a systematic approach to analyzing implementation that does not reduce reform to binary success-failure judgments, but instead captures the variation of enactment patterns and the institutional conditions shaping them. Through this approach, the study is expected to generate evidence that clarifies how autonomy and flexibility are operationalized, how implementation constraints emerge, and what forms of support are necessary to ensure that the Independent Curriculum achieves its intended educational transformation rather than reproducing recurrent reform cycles.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a non-empirical research design due to the absence of primary field data and the study's focus on synthesizing and critically examining policy implementation patterns across Indonesian schools as represented in scholarly and institutional sources. Specifically, the research was conducted as a systematic narrative literature review combined with policy document analysis, drawing on peer-reviewed journal articles, government regulations, ministerial guidelines, and implementation reports relevant to the Independent Learning (Merdeka Belajar) policy and the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka). Data sources were retrieved through targeted searches in academic databases and official repositories, with inclusion criteria emphasizing: (1) direct relevance to curriculum reform or Merdeka Belajar implementation in Indonesia, (2) explicit discussion of school-level enactment (leadership, pedagogy, assessment, differentiation, or governance), (3) publication within the most recent reform period, and (4) methodological clarity for empirical studies included in the synthesis. Exclusion criteria were applied to eliminate duplicated publications, non-scholarly commentary, and sources lacking sufficient analytical substance. The review framework was oriented toward capturing

how policy intentions are translated into school practices, and how contextual constraints shape variation in implementation outcomes across educational settings.

The analytical procedure followed a staged approach consisting of source screening, thematic extraction, and interpretive synthesis to construct an integrated explanation of curriculum reform implementation mechanisms. After eligibility screening, each included source was coded using a structured extraction matrix covering policy objectives, implementation actors, institutional conditions, pedagogical strategies, reported constraints, and documented outcomes. To ensure rigor, the study applied transparency principles through explicit inclusion criteria, systematic coding procedures, and cross-source triangulation between academic literature and official policy documents. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurrent implementation patterns and contradictions, while analytic comparison was employed to distinguish structural constraints from context-specific barriers across school types and regions. Credibility was strengthened through iterative coding, peer debriefing within the research team to reduce interpretive bias, and the maintenance of an audit trail documenting decisions throughout the review process. Since the study relied exclusively on publicly accessible documents and published research, formal human-subject ethical clearance was not required; however, ethical scholarship standards were maintained through accurate citation practices, faithful representation of source claims, and critical appraisal to avoid overgeneralization beyond the evidentiary base.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Policy Architecture and Governance Dynamics of Independent Learning Reform

The analytical synthesis indicates that the Independent Learning reform is best understood as a governance reconfiguration rather than a purely curricular redesign, because the policy simultaneously modifies decision-making authority, learning standards, and the operational logic of school accountability. Policy documents consistently frame autonomy as a mechanism to increase instructional responsiveness, yet the literature shows that autonomy is institutionally filtered through bureaucratic routines that often remain centralized in practice. This tension is visible in the historical pattern of Indonesian curriculum change, where reforms frequently introduce new paradigms while leaving intact structural conditions that shape compliance-oriented implementation cultures (Abidin et al., 2023; Setiawan & Suwandi, 2022). A recurrent theme across sources is that curriculum reform in Indonesia tends to be narrated as a linear modernization project, while empirical evaluations reveal that reform trajectories are cyclic and politically contingent, producing discontinuities that schools must absorb with limited transitional support (Pakpahan et al., 2023). This conceptualization positions Independent Learning as a policy whose success depends less on its ideological coherence than on how governance mechanisms enable schools to convert policy narratives into stable organizational practices (Rizki & Fahkrunisa, 2022).

The review further demonstrates that the policy architecture of Independent Learning is constructed through a layered regulatory ecosystem, where ministerial guidelines, implementation manuals, and programmatic initiatives interact in ways that can generate interpretive ambiguity at the school level. In several accounts, schools are expected to perform autonomy while simultaneously demonstrating compliance with centrally defined competencies, assessment principles, and reporting requirements, producing what can be described as “bounded autonomy” rather than genuine decentralization. Such bounded autonomy is not inherently dysfunctional, yet it requires consistent coordination across policy levels to prevent contradictory signals that undermine school actors’ confidence in implementation. The literature suggests that inconsistency emerges when reforms emphasize innovation rhetorically while implementation instruments emphasize administrative deliverables, causing schools to prioritize documentation over pedagogical transformation (Rizki & Fahkrunisa, 2022). This pattern resonates with broader curriculum reform debates where policy coherence is undermined when governance systems reward visible compliance more than deep instructional change. Within the Indonesian context, the persistence of these contradictions is historically traceable to repeated curriculum transitions that reshape terminology faster than institutional capacity can adapt (Abidin et al., 2023).

A central analytical result concerns the role of school leadership as the primary mediator between national reform intent and local implementation capacity, particularly because principals operate as both instructional leaders and administrative gatekeepers. Studies focusing on principal assistance programs

show that leadership capacity is treated as a strategic lever for reform, since principals are expected to design curriculum programs, manage teacher adaptation, and coordinate school-level planning aligned with the Independent Curriculum (Mustoip et al., 2024). Leadership support is also reported as a decisive factor in secondary schools, where the complexity of subject specialization and assessment expectations amplifies the managerial burden of curriculum transition (Rohmah et al., 2024). These findings indicate that governance decentralization does not eliminate hierarchy, but rather relocates governance responsibilities downward, often without commensurate increases in institutional resources. The review suggests that this downward relocation may unintentionally intensify inequality between schools, since leadership competence and managerial stability vary significantly across contexts. In this sense, curriculum reform becomes a capacity-sensitive intervention whose outcomes are contingent on organizational conditions rather than uniformly determined by policy design (Pakpahan et al., 2023).

The governance literature included in the review also reveals that Independent Learning is not implemented as a single coherent package, but as a constellation of programs that are differentially adopted across regions and school types. Provincial implementation accounts show that local education offices play a substantial role in shaping the pace and interpretation of reform, which can lead to regionally specific enactments that complicate national comparability (Ahid & Sufirmansyah, 2022). Evidence from natural schools demonstrates that alternative institutional models interpret Independent Learning policies through their own pedagogical philosophies, producing implementation patterns that may align with reform principles yet diverge from mainstream bureaucratic expectations (Taali et al., 2023). Such variation suggests that implementation cannot be adequately evaluated through uniform compliance metrics, because the reform is intentionally designed to allow contextual adaptation. At the same time, the literature indicates that adaptation is unevenly supported, creating a scenario where flexibility functions as empowerment for some schools but as uncertainty for others. This duality highlights a core governance dilemma: autonomy-oriented reform increases local discretion while simultaneously increasing the risk of fragmentation in policy enactment (Rizki & Fahkrunisa, 2022).

Table 1 presents an analytical mapping of governance-related implementation themes synthesized from the reviewed literature and policy documents, which clarifies how the reform's institutional mechanisms operate across levels. The table is introduced at this stage because the sources repeatedly converge on a limited set of governance determinants that structure implementation, even when they differ in empirical setting or educational level. The patterns demonstrate that leadership mediation, regulatory ambiguity, and capacity inequality form an interdependent triad, where each element amplifies the effects of the others. This mapping supports the argument that Independent Learning implementation should be analyzed as a governance system rather than as isolated classroom innovation. The table is used as an interpretive anchor for the remainder of this sub-section, particularly to connect governance conditions with pedagogical consequences discussed later.

Table 1. Governance-Related Determinants of Independent Learning Implementation in Indonesian Schools (Synthesis of Reviewed Sources)

Governance determinant	Manifestation in implementation	Reported consequence for schools	Key supporting sources
Bounded autonomy	Autonomy framed rhetorically, constrained by compliance reporting	Schools prioritize documentation over instructional change	Rizki & Fahkrunisa (2022); Pakpahan et al. (2023)
Leadership mediation	Principals coordinate curriculum design, teacher adaptation, program management	Implementation quality depends on leadership capacity	Mustoip et al. (2024); Rohmah et al. (2024)
Regional translation	Local offices shape pace, training, interpretation	Uneven enactment across provinces	Ahid & Sufirmansyah (2022)

Institutional diversity	Alternative schools adapt reform to their pedagogical model	Reform principles realized differently across school ecologies	Taali et al. (2023)
Reform cyclical	Frequent curriculum transitions and shifting policy vocabulary	Implementation fatigue and reduced policy trust	Abidin et al. (2023); Setiawan & Suwandi (2022)

The synthesis also identifies that curriculum reform under Independent Learning is frequently evaluated through process indicators, yet the relationship between process quality and reform effectiveness is not straightforward. Evidence on process quality suggests that reforms can improve learning processes when schools successfully internalize new instructional paradigms and align classroom routines with competency-based goals (Pakpahan et al., 2023). At the same time, evaluation studies emphasize that implementation often remains partial, particularly when schools adopt surface-level elements such as new lesson plan formats while maintaining traditional teacher-centered pedagogy. This discrepancy suggests that process improvement cannot be assumed from policy adoption, because the reform requires deep changes in teacher cognition, classroom management, and assessment orientation. The review implies that implementation success should be conceptualized as transformation of instructional culture rather than compliance with curricular artifacts. Such a conceptual shift aligns with broader policy implementation theory, which treats reform outcomes as emergent properties of actor interpretation, institutional capacity, and governance coherence (Rizki & Fahkrunisa, 2022).

A further governance-related finding concerns the interpretive paradigms teachers use to make sense of the reform, which function as a cognitive bridge between policy discourse and classroom practice. Teacher paradigm studies show that educators interpret the emergence of the Independent Curriculum through prior experiences with curriculum transitions, leading to mixed perceptions ranging from optimism about autonomy to skepticism rooted in reform fatigue (Retnaningrum et al., 2023). This cognitive dimension is crucial because autonomy-oriented reform presupposes that teachers are willing and able to exercise professional judgment, yet professional judgment is constrained when teachers experience uncertainty about evaluation standards or fear misalignment with supervisory expectations. The literature indicates that teachers' interpretations are shaped not only by formal training but also by informal narratives circulating in school communities, which can amplify either trust or resistance. These findings imply that governance mechanisms must address not only technical guidance but also professional meaning-making, because reform legitimacy depends on whether teachers perceive the reform as pedagogically coherent and institutionally supported. The review thus positions teacher paradigm as a governance variable, since cognitive alignment is necessary for policy enactment to move beyond procedural compliance (Retnaningrum et al., 2023; Hadi et al., 2023).

The policy architecture also interacts with subject-specific and level-specific policy extensions, which complicate implementation by introducing parallel reform logics. Evidence from higher education curriculum evaluation indicates that curriculum reform dynamics extend beyond schools and are increasingly linked to broader national modernization narratives, including digital transformation and competitiveness discourses (Rochmiyati et al., 2022). Studies of university-level Merdeka Belajar implementation in English departments illustrate that autonomy and flexibility are framed differently in tertiary contexts, where institutional autonomy is often higher but standardization pressures persist through accreditation and learning outcome frameworks (Wahyuni et al., 2023). Although these studies focus on higher education, they provide analytical insight into how Independent Learning is not a single-sector policy, but a cross-level reform ecosystem whose coherence is difficult to maintain. The implication for schools is that curriculum reform discourse is saturated with multi-level expectations, which can produce conceptual confusion about what autonomy means in practice. This cross-level complexity reinforces the need for governance clarity to prevent the diffusion of inconsistent reform narratives into school implementation (Rochmiyati et al., 2022; Wahyuni et al., 2023).

The synthesis further suggests that Independent Learning reform is intertwined with international policy borrowing logics, particularly in language education where global standards influence national decisions. Research on CEFR-like policy implementation in vocational high schools demonstrates that teacher agency becomes central when external frameworks are localized, because teachers must

negotiate between standardized expectations and local student needs (Yusra et al., 2022). This finding is relevant to Independent Learning governance because the reform similarly expects teachers to adapt curricular goals to context, which requires agency supported by institutional trust. When governance systems emphasize accountability without providing adequate interpretive space, teacher agency becomes constrained, and implementation risks reverting to compliance behavior. The literature thus indicates that policy borrowing and local adaptation are not peripheral issues but core governance challenges in autonomy-oriented reforms. Independent Learning, while domestically framed, operates within global discourses that shape what counts as “quality” and “modern” education, increasing the pressure on schools to adopt externalized standards even as they are encouraged to localize learning (Yusra et al., 2022; Intiana et al., 2023).

A final governance-related result concerns the policy narrative of paradigm shift, which is frequently invoked in official discourse yet unevenly operationalized in implementation instruments. Studies describing the new paradigm of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum emphasize a shift toward competency, student agency, and differentiated learning, framing the reform as a break from content-heavy and exam-driven traditions (Hadi et al., 2023). However, the review indicates that the paradigm shift narrative often coexists with persistent assessment anxieties and administrative routines, which dilute the transformative potential of the reform. This contradiction is not accidental but structurally produced, since schools operate within accountability environments where risk avoidance is rational. The literature suggests that paradigm shift requires not only new curriculum documents but also governance alignment, including assessment reform, supervision practices, and professional development systems that reinforce the intended instructional culture. The governance synthesis thus concludes that Independent Learning reform is a contested institutional project, where implementation outcomes are shaped by how governance systems manage the tension between flexibility and control (Hadi et al., 2023; Pakpahan et al., 2023).

Curriculum reform implementation in Indonesia under Independent Learning cannot be explained through singular causal factors, because it emerges from interacting governance determinants that operate across levels. The literature review demonstrates that policy coherence, leadership capacity, teacher paradigm, regional translation, and institutional diversity jointly shape implementation pathways, producing variation that is structurally patterned rather than random. These findings align with implementation theory that conceptualizes policy enactment as a negotiated process, yet they also extend the theory by showing how reform cyclicity and bounded autonomy are historically embedded features of the Indonesian curriculum system (Abidin et al., 2023; Setiawan & Suwandi, 2022). The synthesis also implies that policy success requires governance instruments that cultivate trust and agency, rather than relying primarily on administrative compliance as a proxy for reform quality (Retnaningrum et al., 2023).

Pedagogical Translation and Classroom-Level Enactment of the Independent Curriculum

The thematic synthesis shows that the most consequential arena of Independent Learning reform is the pedagogical layer, because the curriculum’s promise of autonomy and student-centeredness is ultimately validated or invalidated through classroom enactment rather than policy rhetoric. Across the reviewed studies, teachers are positioned as the central translators of reform, yet the literature consistently indicates that translation is neither automatic nor uniform, since it is mediated by teacher beliefs, professional confidence, and institutional support. This finding aligns with implementation theory that conceptualizes reform as an interpretive practice, where actors reconstruct policy meanings through their own pedagogical repertoires and constraints. Evidence from teacher paradigm research suggests that educators interpret the Independent Curriculum as both an opportunity for instructional renewal and a potential source of uncertainty, particularly when expectations are framed as paradigm shifts without stable guidance on assessment and supervision (Retnaningrum et al., 2023). The review also indicates that classroom enactment tends to be most robust when teachers perceive the reform as coherent with their professional identity and when schools provide organizational conditions that legitimize experimentation (Rohmah et al., 2024).

A critical pedagogical outcome identified in the literature is the reconfiguration of learning objectives from content coverage toward competency development, which is frequently framed as a corrective response to perceived weaknesses in the 2013 Curriculum. Analyses of the 2013 Curriculum’s problems highlight that excessive administrative burden, rigid lesson structures, and

limited flexibility were among the drivers motivating the shift to the Independent Curriculum, with reform discourse emphasizing simplification and contextual responsiveness (Lestari, 2023). This framing is reinforced by studies that describe the Merdeka Belajar curriculum as a new paradigm emphasizing meaningful learning, differentiated instruction, and student agency, where learning outcomes are conceptualized as holistic competencies rather than narrow cognitive attainment (Hadi et al., 2023). Yet the literature also shows that the movement from content to competence is pedagogically demanding, since teachers must design learning experiences that are less linear, more inquiry-oriented, and responsive to diverse student profiles. Implementation studies in elementary schools report that teachers can adopt the curriculum structure and learning flow, but frequently struggle to shift classroom discourse patterns away from teacher dominance, indicating that surface adoption can coexist with deep pedagogical continuity (Efendi & Suastra, 2023). These findings suggest that curriculum reform should be evaluated not only through the presence of new instructional formats but through the degree to which classroom interaction and student participation are substantively transformed (Pakpahan et al., 2023).

Differentiated learning emerges as one of the most theoretically significant and practically contested pillars of the Independent Curriculum, since it functions as the mechanism through which autonomy is expected to translate into equity and inclusion. Teachers' self-reflections in Islamic education contexts reveal that differentiation is widely recognized as a formal requirement, yet it is often operationalized in limited forms, such as varying assignments, without deeper adjustments to learning pathways, formative assessment, or student support strategies (Gea et al., 2022). This pattern indicates that differentiation is constrained not by ideological rejection but by professional capacity, time, and uncertainty regarding what counts as legitimate differentiated practice. Evidence from case studies of differentiated learning through the Pancasila Student Profile project suggests that project-based learning can provide a structurally supportive environment for differentiation, because projects allow multiple entry points for students to demonstrate competence and agency (Usman et al., 2023). At the same time, the literature implies that project-based differentiation can become performative when it is treated as an event rather than as an embedded instructional culture. The synthesis therefore positions differentiation as a reform "stress test," because it reveals whether the system has developed the pedagogical infrastructure required for autonomy to become educationally productive rather than administratively symbolic (Hadi et al., 2023; Gea et al., 2022).

The review also highlights that classroom management is not a peripheral technical matter but a core determinant of whether student-centered pedagogy can function under the Independent Curriculum. Research on classroom management strategies in primary institutions shows that teachers must reorganize learning routines, group dynamics, and classroom norms to accommodate flexible learning activities, collaborative projects, and differentiated tasks (Mubarok et al., 2023). These management demands are amplified in contexts where class sizes are large or where students are accustomed to passive learning, since autonomy-oriented pedagogy requires active participation and self-regulation. The literature indicates that when management strategies are weak, teachers often revert to directive instruction as a risk-minimization strategy, which reduces the reform to a change in documentation rather than in pedagogy. This pattern resonates with the broader governance finding that bounded autonomy encourages compliance behavior, since teachers perceive that instructional experimentation may carry evaluative risk. Classroom management therefore operates as a mediating variable between curriculum ideals and instructional reality, shaping whether the reform produces deeper learning or simply rebrands existing practices (Mubarok et al., 2023; Rizki & Fahkrunisa, 2022).

Table 2 synthesizes the major pedagogical enactment patterns identified across the reviewed sources, clarifying how the Independent Curriculum's core instructional expectations are translated into practice and where the most recurrent constraints emerge. The table is presented at this point because the reviewed studies repeatedly converge on a limited set of pedagogical domains—competency orientation, differentiation, project-based learning, classroom management, and teacher agency—whose interaction structures classroom implementation outcomes. The mapping demonstrates that constraints are rarely isolated, since limited differentiation capacity is often linked to weak formative assessment literacy, and weak classroom management is frequently linked to inadequate professional development support. This integrated view supports the argument that pedagogical enactment is best conceptualized as a system of interdependent practices rather than as a checklist of reform components. The table also provides an interpretive bridge between classroom-level dynamics and the institutional

support mechanisms discussed in governance-oriented studies (Rohmah et al., 2024; Mustoip et al., 2024).

Table 2. Pedagogical Enactment Patterns in the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum (Synthesis of Reviewed Studies)

Pedagogical domain	Intended reform	Common enactment pattern reported	Recurrent constraint
	principle		
Competency-based learning	Shift from content coverage to competence development	Adoption of new lesson structures with partial change in discourse	Persistence of teacher-centered routines
Differentiated instruction	Equity through varied learning pathways	Differentiation limited to task variation	Weak assessment literacy and time constraints
Project-based learning	Student agency and authentic learning	Projects implemented as periodic activities	Risk of event-based rather than embedded practice
Classroom management	Learning autonomy supported by structured routines	Management strategies redesigned for group work	Reversion to directive teaching under pressure
Teacher agency	Teachers as curriculum designers and decision-makers	Agency increases in supportive schools	Agency constrained by accountability anxiety

Source: Authors' synthesis based on coded findings from the reviewed literature (Efendi & Suastra, 2023; Gea et al., 2022; Hadi et al., 2023; Mubarak et al., 2023; Pakpahan et al., 2023; Retnaningrum et al., 2023; Rohmah et al., 2024; Usman et al., 2023).

A significant pedagogical theme concerns the relationship between reform and assessment, where the Independent Curriculum's emphasis on formative processes confronts long-standing traditions of summative evaluation and exam-oriented learning. Although several sources emphasize process quality and meaningful learning, evaluation studies indicate that schools often struggle to align assessment practices with differentiated and project-based learning, particularly when reporting systems still reward standardized indicators (Rizki & Fahkrunisa, 2022). This misalignment creates an implementation contradiction, since teachers are asked to cultivate autonomy and creativity while simultaneously being held accountable to uniform measures of achievement. Evidence on curriculum reform effectiveness suggests that improvements in learning processes are more likely when assessment is used as feedback for learning rather than as a mechanism of control, yet such shifts require professional development and institutional trust (Pakpahan et al., 2023). The literature implies that assessment reform is the hidden infrastructure of curriculum reform, because pedagogy cannot sustainably change when assessment continues to privilege traditional performance metrics. This finding reinforces the claim that classroom-level enactment is inseparable from governance conditions, since assessment practices are regulated through institutional expectations that shape teacher risk calculations (Rizki & Fahkrunisa, 2022; Rohmah et al., 2024).

Another key result concerns the subject-specific nature of curriculum enactment, where certain domains experience reform pressures more intensely due to external standards, disciplinary traditions, or national priorities. Language education literature suggests that curriculum change is often mediated by external frameworks and international discourses, which can intensify teacher workload and complicate autonomy when standardized benchmarks are introduced (Yusra et al., 2022). In vocational contexts, teacher agency becomes central because teachers must localize externally influenced standards while maintaining relevance to local industry and student needs, producing implementation dynamics that mirror the broader Independent Learning tension between autonomy and accountability (Yusra et al., 2022). Studies on Indonesian language education in the Society 5.0 era highlight that curriculum reform discourse increasingly integrates digital literacy and modernization narratives, which

can reshape subject expectations and pedagogical priorities (Intiana et al., 2023). These findings indicate that pedagogical translation is not uniform across subjects, since disciplines vary in their openness to inquiry-based learning, project work, and differentiated pathways. The synthesis thus suggests that a nuanced analysis of Independent Curriculum implementation must recognize disciplinary mediation as a structural factor, rather than treating pedagogy as a generic domain (Intiana et al., 2023; Yusra et al., 2022).

Cross-level evidence also indicates that the Independent Learning reform has produced interpretive spillover effects between schools and universities, particularly because teacher education and university curricula influence how future teachers conceptualize autonomy and curriculum design. Evaluation of higher education curriculum through online survey methods shows that universities are also navigating reform pressures toward relevance, flexibility, and responsiveness, which shapes the professional knowledge environment from which teachers emerge (Rochmiyati et al., 2022). Studies of Merdeka Belajar implementation in university English departments show that autonomy is frequently framed through program flexibility and experiential learning, which may indirectly influence how teacher candidates understand curriculum as adaptable rather than fixed (Wahyuni et al., 2023). However, these studies also show that tertiary contexts face their own standardization pressures, meaning that autonomy can be rhetorically promoted while institutionally constrained, mirroring school-level bounded autonomy. This cross-level resonance suggests that pedagogical translation in schools is partially conditioned by the broader educational ecosystem, since teachers' conceptions of reform are shaped by their own learning histories and professional preparation. The review therefore positions pedagogical enactment as a system-level phenomenon, where the Independent Curriculum's classroom translation is influenced by policy discourses circulating across educational sectors (Wahyuni et al., 2023; Rochmiyati et al., 2022).

The literature also points to a recurring tension between innovation and workload, where the Independent Curriculum's emphasis on contextualized learning can increase teacher labor, particularly when teachers are expected to design differentiated pathways, projects, and formative assessments without adequate time allocation. Implementation studies emphasize that teachers' capacity to innovate depends on school support structures, including collaborative planning, leadership facilitation, and access to training resources (Rohmah et al., 2024; Mustoip et al., 2024). In contexts where such support is limited, teachers may experience reform as an additional burden rather than as professional empowerment, which undermines the reform's intended shift toward autonomy and agency. This finding aligns with teacher paradigm research indicating that educators' interpretations of the reform are shaped by whether they experience it as enabling or as administratively demanding (Retnaningrum et al., 2023). The synthesis thus indicates that workload is not merely an implementation barrier but a theoretical variable shaping teacher agency, since autonomy without support can be experienced as responsibility without capacity. The pedagogical translation of Independent Learning is therefore contingent on whether the reform's design is accompanied by institutional arrangements that redistribute time, resources, and professional learning opportunities (Mustoip et al., 2024; Rohmah et al., 2024).

A further result concerns the role of school culture and collective teacher learning, which appears as a critical mechanism for sustaining instructional change beyond individual teacher effort. Evidence suggests that schools with stronger collaborative cultures are more likely to develop shared interpretations of the Independent Curriculum, reducing uncertainty and enabling teachers to exchange strategies for differentiation, project design, and classroom management. This mechanism is consistent with organizational learning theory, where reform becomes sustainable when knowledge is institutionalized through routines, communities of practice, and shared professional norms. Although the reviewed studies vary in context, they converge on the idea that professional learning is most effective when embedded within school structures rather than delivered as one-off training events (Mustoip et al., 2024). The literature also indicates that school culture interacts with leadership mediation, since principals shape whether collaboration is incentivized and whether teachers perceive experimentation as safe. The synthesis therefore frames school culture as the micro-institutional environment that determines whether pedagogical translation becomes cumulative and scalable, or fragmented and dependent on individual teacher resilience (Rohmah et al., 2024; Mustoip et al., 2024).

The Independent Curriculum's pedagogical translation is characterized by partial transformation, where innovative practices coexist with persistent traditional routines due to structural and cognitive

constraints. The reviewed sources collectively show that competence orientation, differentiation, and project-based learning are widely recognized as reform priorities, yet their enactment is uneven and frequently constrained by assessment misalignment, classroom management challenges, and limited professional support (Gea et al., 2022; Mubarok et al., 2023; Usman et al., 2023). This pattern indicates that the reform is not failing in a simplistic sense, but operating within an implementation ecology where deep pedagogical change requires coordinated support across governance, leadership, and teacher learning systems (Rohmah et al., 2024; Rizki & Fahkrunisa, 2022). The synthesis also reinforces that teacher agency is the central mechanism through which autonomy becomes meaningful, yet agency is fragile when workload increases and evaluative uncertainty persists (Retnaningrum et al., 2023). The findings thus contribute to curriculum reform scholarship by demonstrating that classroom-level enactment is best conceptualized as a negotiated and capacity-dependent process rather than as a linear policy effect.

Institutional Capacity, Teacher Agency, and Systemic Equity in Independent Learning Implementation

The synthesis indicates that the operational success of Independent Learning reforms depends less on formal policy alignment and more on the uneven institutional capacities that determine whether schools can convert policy mandates into sustainable routines. Evidence from school-level support studies demonstrates that the availability of leadership guidance, resource allocation, and professional assistance creates a decisive institutional threshold separating symbolic compliance from substantive implementation (Rohmah et al., 2024). In elementary settings, implementation narratives consistently reveal that schools with stronger organizational structures tend to treat the Independent Curriculum as a managed program, while schools with weaker structures treat it as a fragmented set of tasks (Efendi & Suastra, 2023). This institutional gap becomes more pronounced when curriculum reform is positioned as a rapid response to systemic dissatisfaction with the 2013 Curriculum, which was criticized for administrative overload and limited adaptability in practice (Lestari, 2023). In theoretical terms, the findings support an institutionalist interpretation of curriculum change in which policy success is mediated by organizational capacity rather than assumed to follow automatically from regulatory authority.

A key analytical pattern emerging from the literature is that teacher agency operates as both an enabling mechanism and a site of policy fragility, particularly when interpretive demands exceed teachers' professional preparation. Studies examining teacher paradigms suggest that many educators interpret the Independent Curriculum not as a coherent pedagogical paradigm, but as a new administrative regime requiring technical compliance, which narrows the reform's transformative potential (Retnaningrum et al., 2023). Research focusing on provincial implementation similarly reports that teacher enactment is shaped by the perceived legitimacy of the policy and by local training ecosystems, which vary significantly across regions and institutional types (Ahid & Sufirmansyah, 2022). When teachers interpret the reform primarily as an externally imposed mandate, differentiated learning becomes a procedural slogan rather than a meaningful instructional strategy, particularly in contexts with limited professional development (Gea et al., 2022). This interpretive instability is not merely a micro-level issue, because teacher agency constitutes the principal mechanism through which curriculum policy is enacted, contested, and normalized within classrooms. The literature therefore converges on a critical claim that reform implementation is ultimately negotiated through teachers' interpretive labor, rather than delivered through documents alone.

The analysis also identifies a systemic contradiction between the reform's emphasis on autonomy and the governance conditions that continue to centralize accountability and standardize performance expectations. Evaluations of the Independent Curriculum consistently report that schools are encouraged to innovate, yet they remain subject to performance pressures that incentivize risk avoidance and superficial compliance (Rizki & Fahkrunisa, 2022). This contradiction is reinforced by broader historical trajectories of Indonesian curriculum development, which reveal recurring cycles of reform that rhetorically prioritize modernization while structurally maintaining centralized control (Abidin et al., 2023). The continuity of governance centralization helps explain why autonomy is often translated into increased teacher workload rather than increased pedagogical freedom, especially in schools with limited administrative support. Policy evolution analyses also show that curriculum changes have historically been framed as solutions to national educational problems, even when the

implementation infrastructure remains underdeveloped (Setiawan & Suwandi, 2022). From a policy implementation perspective, these findings suggest that the reform's autonomy discourse functions as a normative ideal that is institutionally constrained by accountability structures that were not redesigned in parallel.

A further theme concerns the distribution of reform benefits across school types, which reveals equity as an implicit but unresolved dimension of Independent Learning implementation. Evidence from studies of natural schools and alternative schooling contexts suggests that institutions with strong philosophical coherence and flexible governance can adopt Independent Learning principles more organically than mainstream schools constrained by bureaucratic routines (Taali et al., 2023). Conversely, mainstream schools frequently report that implementation depends heavily on the availability of external assistance and principal-led program design, which indicates that reform success is contingent on leadership competence and access to support networks (Mustoip et al., 2024). This unequal dependence on leadership and external assistance produces predictable inequities, because schools in disadvantaged regions or with weaker administrative resources face higher implementation barriers. The findings align with broader curriculum reform evaluations showing that quality improvements are often unevenly distributed, producing pockets of innovation alongside persistent stagnation (Pakpahan et al., 2023). In analytical terms, Independent Learning reforms risk reproducing structural inequality when autonomy is granted without simultaneously equalizing the capacity conditions required to exercise that autonomy.

The literature also highlights that classroom-level management and organizational routines represent a practical bottleneck in translating curriculum principles into daily learning processes. Research on classroom management strategies indicates that teachers often experience tension between student-centered learning ideals and the realities of managing heterogeneous classrooms with limited time and resources (Mubarak et al., 2023). In such conditions, teachers may adopt surface-level project activities without embedding the deeper epistemic aims of the curriculum, such as inquiry, reflection, and competency-based progression. This pattern is echoed in school-level evaluations where the reform is implemented through visible artifacts—modules, projects, and documentation—while instructional quality remains uneven. The implication is that curriculum reform requires not only ideological alignment but also operational routines that stabilize classroom practice. As a result, the reform's effectiveness depends on whether schools can develop practical systems that make student-centered pedagogy feasible under real constraints.

The synthesis suggests that differentiated learning is one of the reform's most theoretically central components, yet it is also one of the most unevenly implemented, making it a useful indicator of systemic readiness. Teachers' reflective accounts show that differentiation is often understood as an abstract expectation rather than as an instructional method grounded in diagnostic assessment and adaptive planning (Gea et al., 2022). In practice, differentiation frequently collapses into simplified grouping strategies or generalized claims of "student-centeredness," which reduces its pedagogical precision. This problem is intensified when teachers lack structured guidance for designing differentiated tasks, especially in contexts where professional learning communities are weak. The resulting implementation gap reveals that the reform's conceptual sophistication exceeds the current training infrastructure in many schools. This supports the argument that curriculum reform should be analyzed as a capacity-building project rather than a mere policy replacement.

To clarify the patterns of systemic constraints identified across the reviewed sources, the analysis extracted recurrent implementation barriers and enabling conditions and organized them into a comparative matrix. The distribution in Table 3 indicates that the most frequently documented barrier concerns uneven teacher readiness and interpretive ambiguity, while the most consistently reported enabling condition is leadership-driven institutional support. The table also shows that resource limitations and accountability pressure are repeatedly linked to superficial enactment, especially in mainstream schools. These patterns demonstrate that implementation is shaped by interacting constraints rather than by single-variable deficiencies, which supports multi-level theories of curriculum enactment. The matrix is analytically important because it consolidates the literature's fragmented findings into a coherent explanatory structure that can guide future empirical inquiry.

Table 3. Cross-Study Synthesis of Key Constraints and Enabling Conditions in Independent Learning Implementation

Analytical Dimension	Recurrent Constraints Identified in Literature	Enabling Conditions Identified in Literature
Teacher readiness and interpretation	Limited pedagogical translation, compliance-oriented understanding, uneven training	Structured professional development, reflective practice communities
School leadership and governance	Weak program management, inconsistent supervision, unclear internal coordination	Principal-led design, mentoring, organizational routines
Resources and infrastructure	Limited learning resources, digital gaps, insufficient time allocation	Access to support networks, institutional partnerships
Accountability and assessment	Performance pressure discouraging innovation, documentation overload	Coherent monitoring aligned with autonomy goals
Equity and contextual variation	Disparities across school types and regions, unequal access to assistance	Context-sensitive implementation models

Source: Synthesized from reviewed studies and policy documents, including Rohmah et al. (2024), Retnaningrum et al. (2023), Ahid and Sufirmansyah (2022), Taali et al. (2023), Mustoip et al. (2024), Mubarak et al. (2023), Pakpahan et al. (2023), and Rizki and Fahkrunisa (2022).

The analysis of Table 3 reinforces that implementation barriers are not isolated technical problems but structural issues embedded in governance, professional development systems, and accountability regimes. When leadership support is absent, the reform's operational complexity produces a drift toward administrative compliance, which aligns with findings that teachers interpret the policy through a procedural lens (Retnaningrum et al., 2023). When resources are limited, schools prioritize visible deliverables over instructional depth, which explains why reform outcomes may appear positive in documentation while remaining unstable in classroom practice (Pakpahan et al., 2023). The table also suggests that equity is not an external concern but an internal property of the reform system, because autonomy increases variance when capacity is uneven. This interpretation aligns with natural school evaluations, which show that alternative institutions can adopt the reform more coherently due to flexible governance, while mainstream schools struggle under bureaucratic constraints (Taali et al., 2023). The implication is that reform evaluation should shift from asking whether the policy is implemented to examining how implementation variance is produced and distributed.

A significant implication emerging from the synthesis is that the reform's outcomes are inseparable from the broader historical pattern of curriculum change in Indonesia, where reforms are frequently introduced as corrective responses to perceived failures of prior curricula. Historical analyses indicate that curriculum development has repeatedly shifted in response to ideological, political, and modernization agendas, creating a policy environment in which teachers anticipate change and may treat reforms as temporary rather than enduring (Abidin et al., 2023). This temporal instability affects implementation depth, because schools may invest in compliance rather than long-term pedagogical transformation. Curriculum evolution studies similarly show that changes often occur without sufficient attention to the institutionalization phase, which is necessary for stabilizing new instructional norms (Setiawan & Suwandi, 2022). From a theoretical standpoint, these findings support the argument that reform durability is a critical but underexamined variable in curriculum policy research. The reform's long-term impact therefore depends on whether it can escape the cycle of rapid replacement and become embedded in professional and institutional culture.

The literature also indicates that implementation is increasingly shaped by the reform's alignment with Society 5.0 discourses and digital transformation narratives, which introduces both opportunities and new forms of inequality. Reviews of Indonesian language education under the Independent Curriculum emphasize that digital orientation and adaptive competencies are central to the reform's legitimacy, yet schools vary widely in their ability to operationalize these expectations (Intiana et al.,

2023). In contexts with limited digital infrastructure, the reform's technology-oriented discourse risks becoming symbolic, reinforcing the gap between policy aspiration and practical feasibility. This finding is analytically significant because it shows how global modernization narratives can intensify internal inequities when adopted without structural equalization. The implication is that reform success cannot be evaluated solely through policy coherence but must be assessed through its interaction with infrastructural realities. The reform's promise of autonomy and creativity becomes unevenly distributed when digital capacity is treated as a background assumption rather than a policy problem.

A final dimension concerns the extension of Independent Learning principles into higher education and vocational contexts, which reveals that teacher agency and institutional capacity remain central even outside compulsory schooling. Studies in university English departments indicate that Merdeka Belajar is interpreted through institutional readiness, curricular flexibility, and disciplinary culture, producing variable enactment across programs (Wahyuni et al., 2023). Research on vocational high schools implementing CEFR-like policies demonstrates that teacher agency is shaped by local constraints and professional identity, which parallels the agency dynamics observed in school-level Independent Curriculum implementation (Yusra et al., 2022). These cross-sector findings suggest that the reform's core challenge is not confined to a specific educational level but reflects a broader governance problem in translating policy ideals into institutional practice. Higher education curriculum evaluations further show that implementation is mediated by how institutions interpret reform as either pedagogical innovation or administrative requirement (Rochmiyati et al., 2022). The analytical conclusion is that Independent Learning reforms should be understood as a system-wide reconfiguration project requiring coordinated capacity-building across levels rather than isolated curriculum replacement within schools.

The synthesis ultimately positions institutional capacity and teacher agency as the two most analytically robust explanatory variables for understanding implementation variance and equity outcomes under Independent Learning reforms. Evidence across studies shows that autonomy expands the space for innovation only when schools possess leadership competence, professional development ecosystems, and stable routines capable of sustaining pedagogical change (Rohmah et al., 2024; Mustoip et al., 2024). When these conditions are absent, autonomy functions as a burden-shifting mechanism that transfers responsibility to teachers without equalizing the structural conditions required for success, which undermines reform legitimacy over time (Retnaningrum et al., 2023). The literature therefore supports a critical interpretation in which Independent Learning reforms generate both transformative potential and structural risk, depending on capacity distribution. This duality helps explain why implementation reports simultaneously describe increased creativity and persistent proceduralism. In scholarly terms, the findings contribute to curriculum reform theory by demonstrating that autonomy-based reforms require explicit capacity equalization strategies if they are to avoid reproducing systemic inequality.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the implementation of Indonesia's Independent Learning reforms is best understood as a multi-level policy enactment process in which governance architecture, pedagogical translation, and institutional capacity interact to shape implementation quality and equity outcomes. The analysis shows that policy design has expanded formal autonomy and introduced a competency-oriented curriculum logic, yet implementation remains structurally mediated by accountability pressures, uneven leadership capacity, and differentiated resource conditions across school contexts. At the classroom level, teachers function as the principal interpretive agents who convert reform ideals into instructional routines, making teacher understanding, professional development, and practical classroom management decisive determinants of reform depth. Across the reviewed evidence, differentiated learning and project-based orientations emerge as theoretically central but operationally fragile, often reduced to procedural compliance when institutional support systems are weak. The findings also reveal that autonomy without capacity equalization amplifies disparities, enabling innovation in well-supported schools while producing symbolic enactment in resource-constrained settings. Collectively, these insights position Independent Learning not as a singular curriculum change but as a system-wide governance and capacity-building challenge, requiring coherent alignment between policy intent, institutional support, and classroom-level feasibility to achieve sustainable educational transformation.

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